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ABSTRACT

The author defines learning disabilities (LD); notes controversies and confusion over the meaning of LD and associated terms (such as perceptual handicaps) from P.L. 94-142, the Education For All Handicapped Children Act; and suggests an approach to explain LD to students and parents in clear and nonthreatening language. A filmstrip, "Everybody Has A Song," is recommended as a way to help learning disabled children understand why they are in special classes. The filmstrip and accompanying audiocassette are also intended to help LD children believe they are valuable people with fulfilling futures. (CL)

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EXPLAINING LEARNING DISABILITIES:

A SHOW AND TELL FOR LD LEARNERS, THEIR PEERS, FAMILIES AND REGULAR EDUCATORS

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INTRODUCTION

If the so-called experts can't agree on a definition of Learning Disabilities (LD) there is no way children with that "diagnosis" or "designation" or their parents or almost anyone else can be expected to understand the term. What we can expect is confusion, worry and fear about what LD might mean. Indeed, without a clearly stated explanation of what LD means when it is decided that term best describes a learner who is having school difficulties, LD children and their families can suffer devastating consequences which can cause far greater problems than a learning disability itself.

PL 94-142 includes perhaps the most cited definition of LD:

> "Children with special learning disabilities exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language. These may be manifested in disorders of listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing, spelling or arithmetic. They include conditions which have been referred to as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, developmental aphasia, etc. They do not include learning problems which are due primarily to visual, hearing or motor handicaps, to mental

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retardation, emotional disturbance, or to environmental disadvantage." (Federal Register, 1976, p. 52404)

Try using that to explain learning disabilities to a parent or a student! Read it out loud to yourself! It's a "cafeteria" of terms from the literature which seems designed to pacify the experts no matter what their preference is. The behaviorists probably would tend to explain learning disabilities in terms of some "disorder" of behaviors which show up in school content area or social skills. Other "experts" who don't like the behavioristic approach will probably use some of the wordage found further into the above cited paragraph. They might select terms such as minimal brain dysfunction. They can always use the "etc.", too, if they aren't satisfied with what they see in the congressional definition. Defining learning disabilities seems to be a wide-open game.

If you are the learner who is called LD, or the parent of a child having school problems and labeled LD it is unlikely you'll get much real clarification on the term unless you take at least a night school course in Learning Disabilities or a hefty chunk of some experts time. The likelihood is, the LD term will just plain frighten you.

The purpose of this presentation is to define learning disabilities and discuss implications (the TELL part of the presentation) in clear and honest language and to follow up with the showing of a filmstrip which is to-the-point and appropriate for children of any age, and appropriate for parents and anybody else who might be interested in knowing what the term LD might mean.

LD - DEFINITION

A learning disability means simply that a normally intelligent person is having trouble keeping up with other learners of the same age and/or grade level. Even the "experts" agree on that much. It is when the cause of the problem is discussed that the disagreements appear. All one has to do is to look at the congressional PL 94-142 definition of learning disabilities to realize that it is possible to ignore causes and define LD in terms of falling behind according to "expectations", or to put it another way, some people aren't achieving up to levels which are consistent with their intelligence. It can be said this way, too: compared to the academic progress of most learners with similar ability, the LD learner isn't doing as well in one subject, or maybe more than one subject, as we'd expect.

The congressional PL 94-142 refers to "conditions". That's where the real arguments begin. Tne conditions listed refer to causes of the school problems. Let's look at some of those in that congressional statement.

The first condition stated is "perceptual handicaps". That means that although hearing and vision may be quite normal as to amount heard or seen, some people's hearing and vision is such that they see or hear a bit differently than most people. Some examples are:

1. Some of us can "make out", or "get" or understand words sung to music better than others.
2. Some of us can read maps faster and more accurately that others.
3. Some of us hear the subtle differences in words better than others. (Many people hear the phrase taking something for "granted" as taking it for "granite".)

4. To some, letters like p, q, d and b can easily look like the same thing at times. . . especially when printed in the standard school way (they are all the same thing in different positions).

The list could go on and on. The more differences from the "usual" a person has, the more difficulties can be expected when tackling school tasks. Thus when these perceptual differences make for difficulties we can call them "perceptual handicaps". And, as can be seen in the congressional definition of learning disabilities, that is what our Congress decided to do.

Looking again at the congressional PL 94-142 definition, we also see the terms "brain injury" and "minimal brain injury". These terms needn't scare anybody. Don't forget that normal intelligence is basic to the definition or learning disabilities! The bottom line of all of the terms in the definition is this, i.e., our brains function in complicated ways. There are lots of differences among us. Some of us have special abilities in music, art, etc. Some of us have "tin ears", and some people "can't draw a straight line." It is only when a difference causes an interference in some kind of learning of behavior that it becomes a "handicap". Only when it gets in our way may it be called a learning disability. Some experts go so far as to using terms like "brain injury". Real brain injuries do happen and can change how well and fast one can learn some things. But don't get hung-up on that term. Its real use is in the area of medical research. If anybody uses that one, ask to see the medical evidence!

Dyslexia is also a term used in the Congressional definition. That word has taken a royal beating over the years. "Dys" or "dis" is a "negative". You see it attached to many words such as "disagree".

Add the "dis" to agree and it has the opposite meaning or a way to say "not agree". "Lexia" refers to words. We've put "dis" ("dys") together with "lexia" and the meaning has become a negative associated with words or "trouble" with words. Trouble with words leads to trouble with reading, of course. Reading is a complicated process. But as a rule, when we use the term dyslexia we tend to mean "trouble with reading" as well as trouble with reading <u>because</u> there is some difference in in how a particular person sees or "perceives" the words or letters in the words.

We humans are interesting and complicated creatures. There is no end to our differences. Just think about fingerprints. Each person's is different from everybody elses. Differences are to be expected. They are normal. Usually the differences don't matter even when it comes to school. When they get in the way of learning we must, of course, take them into account, as in the case of learning disabilities.

To be LD is a nuisance at best. Most people "compensate" for their differences which cause these nuisances. Some pursue what they do well at or what a learning disability doesn't interfer with. Others compensate by working harder at some things. Others need special help to cope with their lives and school. All of us, LD or not, need to understand that differences are normal and what a learning disability is so that we can deal with it in our lives, or understand other people who are "learning disabled".

THE FILMSTRIP

I highly recommend taking twenty minutes in all classrooms, special or regular, to show the filmstrip "Everybody Has a Song". It is accompanied by an audio tape which is narrated by "The Fonz", Henry Winkler. Anybody can understand and enjoy the filmstrip and narration. Kids of all ages, parents, regular classroom teachers, administrators and anybody else who will look at it should have a better understanding of learning disabilities after seeing it. It is economical on both counts of money and time. . .only $15.45 and twenty minutes long. An explanatory pamphlet comes with it. The introductory page is as follows:

EVERYBODY HAS A SONG

General Information

EVERYBODY HAS A SONG is an audio-visual production designed to meet two goals. The first is to help the learning disabled child to understand why he is in a special education class and how he may benefit from being there. The second goal is to help the learning disabled child believe that he is a valuable person who can look forward to a fulfilling and productive future.

The production consists of a filmstrip, synchronized with an audiocassette, which is 20 minutes in length. The filmstrip has inaudible (50 Hertz) automatic advance signals on one side and audible manual advance signals on the other.

The narrator of this production is Henry Winkler, who is widely admired by both adults and children. He offers a warm, sensitive, and empathetic performance.

According to our agreement with Mr. Winkler, EVERYBODY HAS A SONG may not, under any circumstances, be shown on television, neither public nor private. It is an educational film, and it may not be used for entertainment or profit.

There is a segment of the production concerning Nelson A. Rockefeller and his views on coping with dyslexia. This material is included through the courtesy of TV Guide.

EVERYBODY HAS A SONG is copyrighted by Barbara M. Chesler, January 1978. This includes the song, "Everybody Has a Song." All rights are reserved.

For further information, write A SONG, P.O. Box 22206, Sacramento, California 95822. (From: Everybody Has a Song, 1978, p.1)

SUMMARY

It is understandable why there is considerable confusion among children, families and regular educators concerning the meaning of the term learning disabilities. So far the experts in the field of Special Education cannot agree among themselves on just what a learning disability is. In spite of the confusion it is possible to explain to children and adults the basic concept of LD. It is recommended here that straight-forward simple explanations be given to LD children, their peers, their families and all regular school personnel, and that the filmstrip "Everybody Has A Song" be used as a follow up.

References

Chesler, Barbara M., "Everybody Has A Song." A filmstrip and audio tape. Sacramento, California, 1978.

United States Congress, PL 94-142. "Congressional Record," Vol. 121, Washington D.C., 1975, p. 52402.

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